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Powerful theater at Infringement

By **GALIE BINDER**

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The Infringement Festival, which has been held in Buffalo since 2005, is an international, non-profit based, counter-cultural arts festival. Other locations include New York City, Bordeaux, and Montreal, the festival's founding city.

This year's Buffalo festival, which began July 24 and ended Sunday, included more than 300 events at 40 plus venues in and around the Allentown neighborhood. I sampled a variety of infringement events over the past weekend, most of them free. The events, ranging from a moving poetry reading at a center for developmentally disabled adults, to a trippy art-installation at Nietzsche's, showcased the city's vibrant alternative arts community. One performance in particular seemed to sum up the infringement Festival's creed of using experimental art to provoke community reaction and reflection. This was a play presented by Subversive Theatre called " ... and they put handcuffs on the flowers."

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This dramatic work by Fernando Arrabal was written and is set in 1969, years after the Spanish Civil War ended -- a time when Franco and his fascist government ruled Spain. The bulk of the story unfolds within the walls of a political prison where four inmates describe their predicament.

Arrabal drew upon two experiences in writing the play: his father's imprisonment during the Spanish Civil War for being a revolutionary, and his own incarceration in 1967 for the crime of "blasphemy."

"... and they put flowers on the handcuffs" was shown late at night at the Former Kitchen Distribution Warehouse on Buffalo's West Side. Audience members congregated outside in the Warehouse's desolate parking lot. When the doors opened, we were led into the performance space in groups by women dressed in white and wearing white kabuki masks, who represented the Fascist prison guards. I found myself feeling grateful as they gently took our hands and led us down a narrow staircase deep into a musty basement, protecting us from the surrounding darkness and confusion. I soon realized that I was experiencing precisely what Arrabal intended: Fascist leaders rise to power by giving hopeless people a sense of security, through false, patriarchal acts masquerading as compassion. The warehouse setting was perfect -- we sat, as if prisoners, on overturned boxes in the cavernous room, while the "real" prisoners sat on the straw-covered floor of their cell. Our physical discomfort only added to the sense that we were being subjugated by some unseen force.

The cast had eight characters: four revolutionaries and four women guards. The play gave an intimate glance into the prisoners' lives through poetic, surreal dialogue, and superb acting. Throughout the play, the prisoners explained who they were and what they had suffered, while the spectral guards coldly reported on conditions in Spain's political prisons.

"... and they put handcuffs on the flowers" was replete with powerful metaphor. The fact that masked women were used as the Fascist guards underscored the fact that they were simply playing a role anyone could fill; they represented the system of fascism, not particular individuals.

The connections between fascism and theater were further suggested at the end of the play; after the hero had been brutally executed. The guards silently led us out of the basement. They didn't have to tell us to leave immediately and refrain from applauding or even speaking. Like Spain's citizens, we knew our roles and performed them obediently.

Galia Binder will be a junior at Amherst.